

State Boards: Critical Link to Quality Public Education

Citizen control over education through the mechanism of lay governing boards is an enduring American tradition. In the early 1800s, the first citizen groups were organized on the state level for the purpose of administering public schools, and these state boards of education soon became integral to the governance of education in America. State mandates became strengthened and enforced—providing not only for compulsory teaching, but also for school building, supervision, school attendance, and certification of teachers. State board independence from direct political pressure and from the political rhythms of gubernatorial and legislative elections was firmly established in the years after World War I. Whether in state constitutions or statutes, the missions of boards were articulated through clear and unequivocal duties and responsibilities.

Today state boards of education or their equivalent exist in every state except Wisconsin and Minnesota. Their diversity is great, varying in method of selection, size, and governance structure. While the scope of board responsibility is defined differently in every state, there are some common areas of jurisdiction. These include:

- ★ Setting statewide curriculum standards;
- ★ Establishing high school graduation requirements;
- ★ Determining qualifications for professional education personnel;
- ★ Establishing state testing and assessment programs;
- ★ Establishing standards for accreditation of local school districts and preparation programs for teachers and administrators;
- ★ Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act and administering federal assistance programs; and
- ★ Developing rules and regulations for the administration of state programs.

No matter what their individual mandate, state boards have always been regarded as critical to insuring the prominence of education as a state function. The responsibilities of state boards reflect two deeply held American educational values: the lay governance of education, and the separation of educational policymaking from partisan politics. While others in the policymaking process tend to reflect specific concerns and more political perspectives, the state board is intended to serve as an unbiased broker of education decisionmaking, focusing on the big picture, articulating the long-term vision and needs of public education, and making policy based on the best interests of the public and the young people of America.

KEY ROLES OF STATE BOARDS OF EDUCATION

In the late 1980s, the NASBE Task Force on State Board Leadership, composed of present and former state board members, as well as representatives from state legislatures, governor's offices, local education boards and several state superintendents of schools, defined the basic roles of state boards of education and the key positions boards hold in maintaining and improving the quality of public schools. These include:

Advocate for Education: The state board serves as the primary advocate for a quality education for all children and youth in the state. As such, the board seeks to promote excellence in the education of all students and advocates equality of access to educational opportunity.

Liaison: The state board serves as a bridge between educators and others involved in education policy. It translates the concerns of the general public, elected officials, business leaders and civic groups into policy and clearly communicates them to educators. At the same time, the board articulates the needs of the education system to the state's public and private constituencies—and helps assure continued citizen support for education at a time when fewer adults have children in school.

Consensus Builder: The state board encourages communication and consensus among all those who seek to influence current state education policies and help formulate long-range policy goals and plans. Although concurrence may not always be possible, a commitment to consensus building ensures that all citizens will be heard.

Policymaker: The state board is responsible for policies that promote educational quality throughout the state. In this capacity, the board defines the fundamental mission of the state's education system and develops the system's long-range goals. In order to meet these goals, the board enacts appropriate regulations, lobbies for necessary legislation, develops an adequate education budget, supports local implementation efforts, and regularly measures the performance of the system.

STATE EDUCATION GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

The education governance structures of over eighty percent of the states fall into four basic governance models. These are:

Model 1: The governor appoints the state board and the board appoints the chief state school officer (12 states).

Model 2: The governor appoints the state board and the chief state school officer is elected (11 states).

Model 3: The state board is elected, and the board appoints or nominates the chief state school officer (8 states).

Model 4: The governor appoints both the state board and the chief state school officer (9 states).

In addition, three states have a mix of elected and appointed board members; in two states the legislature appoints the state board; in one state several elected officials appoint board members; in two states the board is elected and the governor appoints the chief; and in one state some board members are elected by local school boards (in addition to a majority appointed by the governor).

The NASBE Task Force on State Board Leadership noted that the governance structure does affect how a board operates, and how it relates to the governor, the legislature, and the chief state school officer. But the Task Force also said that “these factors have less bearing on the influence and effectiveness of a state board of education than does the board's ability to work within the particular structure and environment of the state. Changing the governance structure in a state offers no ‘quick fix’ to the challenges confronting” public education. Experience and research suggest that successful boards are found within each governance model.

The Task Force concluded, however, that “no matter what a state's governing structure, it *must* ensure the independence of its state board. Beyond that, the key to success lies in a board's skill in carrying out its mandate and working cooperatively with other decisionmakers.”